

ABE FACILITATORS AND ADMINISTRATORS REPORT ON

# OPPORTUNITY FOR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

The USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project:

- Provides increased access to quality alternative basic education (ABE) classes, social and leadership development opportunities, and livelihoods skills training for out-of-school youth, ages 13 to 35, with no or marginal literacy and numeracy skills
- Supports the continued growth of economic opportunity through work-based learning and an emphasis on clubs and local alliances to support youth education and livelihood development



**ALTERNATIVE  
BASIC EDUCATION  
LEARNING SERIES**

**JULY 2016, ISSUE 2**

## INTRODUCTION

The results of focus group discussions (FGDs), held with a sample of alternative basic education facilitators and administrators in two Liberian counties, show that educators view professional development as a path to professional growth and potential career advancement. FGD participants focused on the role of professional development in supporting mastery and application of knowledge and skills, promoting confidence and creativity, and explaining new teaching strategies to allow them to more effectively meet the needs of learners and their country.

This issue of the Advancing Youth Alternative Basic Education Learning Series summarizes the findings and resulting recommendations of Advancing Youth's FGDs on professional development views and preferences.

## OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Since its inception in 2011, Advancing Youth has engaged alternative basic education (ABE) facilitators and administrators in a variety of professional development activities designed to build facilitators' knowledge of the ABE curriculum and to help them transition from a teacher-centered approach to a learner-centered one.

Within this context, the project implemented a nonexperimental qualitative study to learn more about the factors contributing to effective continuous professional development for ABE facilitators in Liberia. This study looked closely at two related questions:

*[Professional development and curriculum material] has institutionalized activity-based learning; it has engaged learners; it has made facilitators learn through the teaching we do.*

—Grand Bassa Facilitator

- 1) How do teachers/facilitators of ABE in Liberia define effective professional development (PD)?
- 2) What are the factors associated with developing and sustaining professional development opportunities for facilitators in ABE programs in Liberia?

Four focus group discussions were conducted with 39 ABE facilitators and administrators in Montserrado and Grand Bassa counties in February 2016. Two FGDs were held with educators from rural ABE sites, and two with educators from urban sites.

*AYP offered workshop on peer learning; working in pairs. I use it a lot in my teaching.*

—Grand Bassa Facilitator

## KEY FINDINGS

### Influential PD

Participants identified the **most influential PD experiences** as those that helped them move from rote, teacher-centered practices to participatory, learner-centered instruction by developing a better understanding of youth and adult learners and through the direct application of new facilitation and instructional skills. In addition, some participants cited PD activities that strengthened their own content knowledge, particularly in reading skills of phonics and phonemic awareness, as being most influential. These participants also indicated that effective professional development is transferrable, and that they used these new skills and knowledge in other situations, particularly in their formal school teaching. Finally, participants

indicated that ongoing, connected professional development is more beneficial than one-time events.

Participants' experiences of meaningful PD in the past fueled their delineation of **key areas and modes of delivery for further PD**, including PD that builds content knowledge, instructional planning and design, and leadership skills. Participants felt growth in these areas could best be delivered through workshops, university courses, study guides, and reading groups, all of which provide ongoing training in an interactive environment. Yet participants also noted that key environmental and personal factors—including administrative, institutional, and community support as well as personal motivation—were necessary for their participation in PD opportunities.

### Developing and Sustaining PD

The delivery of the most influential PD experiences requires more than good content that changes participants' teaching practices—it requires a commitment to continuously developing and providing PD opportunities.

Participants identified three key factors that are important for developing and sustaining high quality PD (Table 1). The common thread among these factors was commitment:

- Commitment from education stakeholders to provide the opportunities for professional development and to strengthen incentives in the form of certification and stipends
- Commitment from ABE facilitators and administrators to implement new strategies and approaches, share experiences, and plan purposefully and carefully before teaching

Overall, emerging from the FGDs is facilitators' belief that when they experienced meaningful, relevant, ongoing professional learning, they changed their philosophy about teaching and learning, especially with regard to learner-centered teaching. They developed new ways to elicit and listen to their students' ideas, learned and implemented teaching strategies that promoted greater learner participation, and strengthened their abilities to give positive feedback to learners. These changes resulted in a more respectful and welcoming classroom environment for both teacher and learner. Overall, for participants in the Montserrado and Grand Bassa discussions, PD opportunities were places of new learning for them, which they then applied to help improve their students' learning outcomes.

#### KEY FACTORS FOR DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING QUALITY PD, AS IDENTIFIED BY PARTICIPANTS

- Improved, adequate funding and incentives for PD activities
- Provision of resources and a receptive school environment for PD in terms of time allocation and space for collaboration
- A disposition on the part of the teacher to further his or her own professional growth

Table 1: Key Factors for Developing and Sustaining Quality PD

## LESSONS LEARNED

This study of professional development implemented with the Advancing Youth project ABE facilitators and administrators yielded important insight on what kind of PD opportunities instructors value and find useful. **Key lessons learned** include the following:

### Effective professional development is a process, not an event.

Participants in this study were consistent in acknowledging that effective professional development is a process of continuous participation in structured, focused learning opportunities. This process perspective reflects an understanding of learning to teach effectively as “a developmental process that unfolds over time” (Whitcomb, Borko & Liston 2009, Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Instructors in this study believe that having access to multilevel learning pathways on an ongoing basis can support changes in their practices that result from deeper learning.

### Effective professional development leads to more learner-centered instruction.

Effective PD should prepare teachers to develop expertise in content and how to teach it, in an environment of care and respect for learners. Participants in the FGDs believed that with the knowledge acquired in PD experiences, they were able to shift their teaching to include more active-learning strategies.

### Facilitators view instructional guides and resources as a form of independent professional development.

Participants in all four focus groups identified study guides in their top three or four preferred forms of professional development. While curriculum materials, such as the scripted lesson plans and background information found in facilitators manuals, are not usually viewed as a form of professional development, discussions about study guides revealed that FGD participants view ABE facilitators manuals as a form of a study guide and thus part of their professional development. They learn from the facilitators manual, which includes background content information for most lessons and diverse instructional approaches. When discussing study guides as a form of professional development, many were therefore referring to the facilitator manuals as study guides.

Although the facilitators manual provides scripted instructional guidance, our analysis of the FGD data suggests that the scripted approach may not be the primary reason for preferring study guides. The facilitator manual is viewed as resource rich, offering content and instructional methodology to support instructional decisions in a context where teacher materials and other reading materials are not available. What is also apparent is that the facilitator manual became a form of self-directed learning when formal opportunities for PD were absent.



### Effective professional development programs require substantial investment of resources, commitment from participants, and support from local community stakeholders.

The FGDs also highlighted some of the institutional, national, and personal factors that may contribute to effective professional development or that act as a disincentive for educators to participate. Financial support for professional development, in the form of travel stipends and salary supplements, are essential for the full participation of ABE facilitators and administrators. However, participants also said that recognition, in the form of certificates, and/or a clear career pathway are also powerful incentives for taking advantage of PD activities, as is the full support of the education stakeholders in their local communities. Personal commitment is essential, but not sufficient, to participate in sustained professional development.

*‘I learned that the teacher should do less and the learners should do more. I was a conventional teacher, a ‘know-it-all.’ Stand, teach, leave. With professional development, I learned that teachers talk less and students more.*

—Montserrado Facilitator



Photo credit: USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project

## RECOMMENDATIONS

These lessons learned from FGD participants discussing professional development provide powerful suggestions for the delivery of PD to instructors in Liberia. Thus, this study suggests the following recommendations for the delivery of PD to ABE instructors in Liberia:

### Recommendation 1: Professional Development should be interactive and promote teacher-to-teacher collaboration in learning communities.

Workshops, reading groups, study guides, and action research approaches were referred to by participants as providing opportunities for interaction and engagement, a form of a learning community. PD effectiveness is enhanced when opportunities are situated in the facilitators' context of practice and promote learning together in professional learning communities on topics relevant to their teaching and learning needs in their context (Higgins and Parson, 2009).

### Recommendation 2: Providers of educator professional development need to pay more attention to financial and non-financial incentives for participants.

Educators need to know that there is a career pathway that is related to their participation in professional

development. Even if adequate PD is provided, issues related to such things as the absence of institutional support—including government-sponsored financial and other material incentives or rewards—would act as a constraint. Appropriate incentives of remuneration—including increments in salary and supplemental support to participate in offsite-based opportunities—would give teachers a reason to be engaged.

### Recommendation 3: Expand professional development opportunities beyond the traditional workshop models.

Facilitators and administrators identified a preference for a range of types of professional development, including study guides, workshops, university courses, cluster training, and action research experiences. Even PD activities with which participants had little experience and which they did not rank among their top choices received deep interest from participants eager to develop their educational practices. Discussion revealed that participants are ready to draw on diverse, expanded opportunities that they believe would provide effective and fulfilling opportunities for new learning and professional growth. This study makes a case for broadening the traditional range of PD beyond the workshop models.

## REFERENCES

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**Advancing Youth's Learning Agenda** includes a set of research questions that have arisen during project implementation and provide the opportunity to explore the effectiveness and sustainability of the project's integrated learning, leadership and livelihoods model.



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